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ABSTRACT

The treatment of politeness features is particularly revealing of the complex dynamics that language teachers face given the cultural variety present in schools and colleges. Along with its positive contributions to the learning environment, the growing student diversity poses a significant challenge for both students and educators. This paper explores the culturally-based variations of a particular speech act (the compliment). A review of current literature on the subject among the speakers of five languages (American English, Chinese, Japanese, Egyptian Arabic, and Spanish) illustrates contrasting patterns of discourse. The review indicates that if communicative competence is a learning objective, the language curriculum needs to include direct treatment of such sociolinguistic features. Implications for today's classroom include the important role teachers play in implementing the use of compliments in the target culture, (Contains 14 references.) (SM)

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Cross Cultural Varieties of Politeness

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The treatment of politeness features is particularly revealing of the complex dynamics that we as language teachers face given the cultural variety present in our schools and colleges. Along with its positive contributions to the learning environment, the growing diversity of the students in our classrooms can and does pose a significant challenge for both students and educators. To extend the discussion of this important topic, we have attempted in this study to explore the culturally based variations of a particular speech act the compliment. A review of current literature on the subject among the speakers of five different languages (American English, Chinese, Japanese, Egyptian Arabic, and Spanish) illustrates contrasting patterns of discourse. Our review indicates that if communicative competence is a learning objective, the language curriculum needs to include direct treatment of such sociolinguistic features. We have put forward some suggested practical approaches for implementing this objective in day-to-day classroom instructional activities. Our hope here is to stimulate a deeper examination and appreciation of the rich diversity of our cultural inheritance and to develop creative applications that explore this diversity in the 21st century classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

While the increasing diversity of the modern classroom poses special challenges for students and educators generally, this is especially the case in higher educational settings such as current ESL, LSP and other classrooms where people from different countries and social classes come together to form a learning community. In such settings, the goal of communicative competence suggests that language teachers need to help students comprehend the implicit cultural differences distinguishing their own experience from that which is embodied within the speech acts of speakers of a target language. Assuming we accept that as a goal, how exactly are teachers to construct activities that facilitate an understanding of the underlying implications of subtle pragmatic features, such as politeness?

We can begin to answer that question by exploring the role of the cultural context of politeness features. The variety of ways we express politeness and respond to speech acts featuring politeness are determined by underlying, cultural-based assumptions about what it means to be polite. The illocutionary force behind a particular polite utterance, a compliment for example, might differ completely from one culture to another. Socio-pragmatic failure can occur as a result of the learner's miscalculations regarding social distance, his or her relative

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rights and obligations, and the size of an imposition carried by an utterance (Thomas, 1983).

In light of sociolinguistic studies illustrating significant differences in politeness features, some analysts have attempted to establish a theoretical framework to assist in comparing and contrasting politeness features across cultures.

THEORIES OF POLITENESS

One of the leading theories of politeness was developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), who argue that there are two forms of politeness: positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness strategies are attempts by a speaker to treat the listener as a friend or as someone to be included in discourse. For an American speaker, giving a friend or co-worker the compliment, "Your hair looks nice today," would be one example of positive politeness. Negative politeness, on the other hand, is an attempt by the speaker to save the listener's face by engaging in some formality or restraint. For an American speaker, an example of negative politeness would be responding to the question, "Do you like my new haircut?" with, "It looks great," even though the speaker's true opinion is that the haircut looks horrible.

Leech (1983) sees cultural rules at work in expressions of politeness and attempts to categorize in more detail some of the underlying intent behind these forms by articulating a set of rules or Politeness Maxims at work in polite dialogue.

1) Tact maxim: minimize cost and maximize benefit to other.
2) Generosity maxim: minimize benefit and maximize cost to self.
3) Approbation maxim: minimize dispraise and maximize praise of other.
4) Modesty maxim: minimize praise and maximize dispraise of self.
5) Agreement maxim: minimize disagreement and maximize agreement between self and other.
6) Sympathy maxim: minimize antipathy and maximize sympathy between self and other.

While these maxims do not seem to contradict each other in principle, failure to recognize these maxims as they are expressed in particular utterances can lead to what Thomas (1983) calls "cross-cultural pragmatic failure" (p. 92). Thomas indicates that pragmatic failure can occur at two levels: failure to understand which proposition the speaker has expressed and failure to understand the pragmatic force of the speaker's utterance. The potential of pragmatic failure is apparent when reviewing specific contrastive examples of politeness features across cultures. A few illustrations are detailed below.

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FIVE NATION ASSESSMENT

Speakers of Egyptian Arabic and Speakers of American English

Nelson, Bakary, and Batal (1993) report that for Egyptians compliments function to contribute to interpersonal or group solidarity. They also find differences between Egyptian speakers and American English speakers in that Egyptians, compared with Americans, frequently express compliments regarding natural appearances and personal traits; who the person *is*, and not what they *do*. Also, Egyptians do not offer compliments as frequently as do Americans. Nelson et al. suggest that this may be in part due to the Arab belief in the "evil eye," or the potential for compliments to bring bad luck. Egyptians use a large number of similes, metaphors, and preceding ritualized phrases such as "Eeh l-Halaawa di!" (What is all this beauty!). In addition, Nelson et al. suggest that Egyptians prefer a direct approach to giving compliments while they exercise indirect approaches for negative feelings as a mature way to save face.

Speakers of Spanish

According to Moore (1996), *piropos* are a type of compliment used by Spanish speakers in the form of a "spontaneous outburst of poetic rhymes" (p. 116) and are considered as a form of verbal artistry. These complimentary remarks, rooted in the customs and tradition of courtly love, are widely accepted in Hispanic society where the attribute of womanliness is highly valued. Some of the examples of *piropos* provided in Moore's paper (1996) are shown below.

Table 1 Examples of Piropos

Spanish Form: (Direct Translation:) *Cultural Meaning:*	¡Vaya usted con Dios y su hija conmigo! (May you go with God and your daughter with me!) *You have a beautiful daughter.*
Spanish Form: (Direct Translation:) *Cultural Meaning:*	¡Dios mío! Tantas curvas y yo sin freno! (My God! So many curves, and me without brakes!) *You are sexy.*
Spanish Form: (Direct Translation:) *Cultural Meaning:*	Dejaran el cielo abierto y se voló un angelito. (Heaven was left open, and out flew an angel.) *You are beautiful.*

Moore (1996) Cultural meaning added.

Despite the probable interpretations from an American point of view that piropos are sexist, an interpretation that may be further fed by the fact that piropos are usually initiated by a young male to a young female, many native Spanish speakers esteem piropos as an art form and do not find them explicitly sexist or as sexual in nature as they might seem. One Spanish speaker consulted in this regard pointed out that the phrase, "¡Vaya usted con Dios y su hija conmigo!" "(May you) go with God, and your daughter (go) with me" may be uttered to a little child (Morales, 2000, personal communication). In that context,

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the statement is no more an invitation to sex than the American English expression to a child "he's so cute I could just eat him up" is a display of cannibalistic tendencies.

These examples suggest that what one culture defines as sexism may or may not be so described in another. It is evident that further cultural and anthropological analysis is required and an appropriate explanation of the background of such compliments is needed for Spanish language learners.

Speakers of Chinese and American English

Chen (1993) brings a focus on Chinese and American subjects to her study of politeness. She found Brown and Levinson's theory to be insufficient for explaining certain findings in her research and argued that in Brown and Levinson's theory individuals always respond to compliments by accepting them since the compliment is a form of positive politeness and failing to accept threatens the complimenter's positive face. However, both American and Chinese speakers were found to engage in deflection responses (e.g. "Did I really do that well?"), and Chinese speakers frequently responded to compliments with rejection followed by self-denigration. Given certain difficulties analyzing these actions according to Brown and Levinson's theory, Chen proposes instead the use of Leech's Politeness Maxim, as described previously. The summary from her findings is as follows.

> Differences in American English Speakers (AESs) and Chinese Speakers (CSs):
>
> | | American | Chinese |
> |---|---|---|
> | Accepting the Compliment | Yes (39.3%) | Yes (1.0%) |
> | Returning the Compliment | Yes (18.5%) | No |
> | Thanking and Denigrating | No | Yes (3.4%) |
> | Deflecting | Yes (29.5%) | No |
> | Rejecting the Compliment | Yes (12.7%) | Yes (95.7%) |

It was found that the AESs are primarily motivated by Leech's Agreement Maxim (compliment acceptance) while the CSs are motivated by his Modesty Maxim (compliment rejection and self-denigration). This difference appears to be related to differences of social values between the two cultures, particularly in their respective beliefs regarding what constitutes self-image.

Speakers of Japanese and American English

Just as speakers of Chinese indicate the use of self-denigration, according to Daikuhara (1986) speakers of Japanese (JS) exhibit a similar pattern in their employment of compliments and responses to compliments. In her study, JSs used compliments in pursuing a communicative strategy of politeness achieved by downgrading oneself or comparing oneself negatively, a negative politeness

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approach that also created distance (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Daikuhara also found some similarity between JSs and AESs in terms of the primary function of compliments: to generate harmony or solidarity. The Japanese tend to compliment both appearances as well as abilities, which is also the case among Americans. In addition, they indicate formal attributions such as the status of schooling. The response to compliments, on the other hand, differed greatly between these two groups. Of the responses, 95% were "self - praise avoidance" and only 5% showed appreciation, while "thank you" was the most frequent response among Americans. These results are consistent with Chen's study among CEs. Daikuhara also found that JSs very seldom compliment their own family, while this was not the case among Americans. This also might be another indication of the function of downgrading oneself, since in Japan the family is often considered to be a part of one's self.

Implications for Today's Classroom

A contemporary language classroom can easily consist of a group of students with communicative approaches as diverse as all of those just described. This potential underlines the need for classroom strategies that address the goals of communicative as well as linguistic competence.

Efforts to facilitate the development of communicative competence have attracted significant attention in educational linguistic research since the 1970s (see Savignon, 1972, 1983 for a review). However, practical applications based on the findings of these studies are made particularly difficult by the challenge of weaving a focus on social and cultural aspects of language learning into the traditional language classroom. For practitioners, the significance of teaching sociolinguistic elements of language is often overshadowed by the demands of teaching linguistic features. Scarcella (1979) found that both higher and lower proficiency learners of English are limited in their use of politeness features in the target language. It takes great care and sensitivity to implement socio-pragmatic objectives in language learning especially given a constantly changing society.

How, then, can practitioners implement such learning objectives as is illustrated by the specific example of the treatment of politeness features? According to Thomas (1983), pragmatic information cannot be absorbed simply by being immersed in the culture. Billmyer (1990) concurred with Thomas on this point and provided the first systematic study of, "the application of sociolinguistic instruction in a classroom setting tested in the analysis of learners' conversations in a social context" (p. 50). Her findings indicate that a greater number of compliments were given by learners in a specially instructed group than by learners who did not receive the instruction.

Such findings indicate that teachers play a significant role in implementing the use of compliments in the target culture. The task of bringing such pragmatic features to the learners' attention rests on the shoulders of each

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educator. Moore (1996) makes this point decisively, indicating that "teachers must be trained not only as language teachers but as culture teachers" (p. 119). Specifically, Moore suggests that teacher education include sociolinguistic and anthropological linguistic methods of research.

During this study we developed two possible methods for fostering cultural awareness and communication competence regarding politeness features. In the first, a dialogue is constructed between two teachers or one teacher and a student who is a fluent speaker of the target language. The dialogue can be turned into a comparison of Japanese and American statements and an examination of the stream of consciousness in the discourse of giving and replying to compliments. Each of two speakers exchange their compliments and responses, with each utterance followed by the speaker turning to the students and stating the pragmatic intent or the understood meaning of the response as appropriate. This approach could be used with other languages as well. An example of such a demonstration is detailed in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2 Compliment from an American speaker to a Japanese speaker

Speaker	Utterance	Speaker's Intended Pragmatic Meaning	Possible Meaning as Understood by Hearer
American	Your child is one smart girl.	Your child is one smart girl.	She thinks her child is not smart.
Japanese	Oh, no, she is not.	She might be but it is not good to praise too much my own child.	

Table 3 Compliments from a Japanese speaker to an American speaker

Speaker	Utterance	Speaker's Intended Pragmatic Meaning	Possible Meaning as Understood By Hearer
Japanese	Your presentation last week was spectacular.	Your presentation last week was spectacular.	This person is full of herself.
American	Why, thank you.	I don't really believe this, but it's not polite to argue with her.	

Such a demonstration is one technique for drawing the attention of students to potential pragmatic failure.

A second approach is the 'down the garden path treatment' (Tomasello & Herron, 1988, 1989), a method in which errors are explicitly induced. Tomasello and Herron provided evidence in their study illustrating that the induction and formal correction of problematic features leads to "cognitive comparison" and results in favorable production among students. In this case, we suggest that the teacher give students examples of specific statements or expressions that the teacher can predict will be incorrectly interpreted. The teacher allows students to

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react to the statement, then explains what the utterance means to speakers of the target language.

After the demonstration, specific explanations and the instructions on norms in the target culture would be recommended. Our suggestion is to implement some task- based instruction such as group work or dyads giving and responding to compliments in settings of the target culture. Another approach involves students in a pseudo-dictogloss exercise (e.g. students read or listen a paragraph of giving and responding to compliments). Students are asked to write down the pragmatic implications of the discourse in a paragraph. Finally, they are partnered with another student to discuss the findings.

Implications for Future Research

Our hope here is to stimulate a deeper examination and appreciation of the rich diversity of the cultures present in today's educational environment. Our future tasks as practitioners include exploring creative implementations of the previously described classroom objectives and the encoding of step-by-step progress (if recognized) among students. An important aspect of the research yet to be completed is to evaluate the outcomes of the appropriate socio-pragmatic features after instruction and exercises have been applied in the classroom.

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